

## ***“The Phenomenon of Premarital Cohabitation in Poland and its Meaning: A Presentation of recent Qualitative Empirical Research”***

### **1. Introduction**

Marital patterns have changed dramatically in the Western world – for example more than half of all marriages in the United States are now preceded by cohabitation and in Europe cohabitation precedes first marriages in 40% to 80% of cases (Cherlin 2004). As a result, cohabitation as *the expression of an emotionally and physically intimate relationship which includes a common living place and which exists without legal or religious sanctions*, for many has become an inevitable element on the way to marriage, and, what is more, for some has become a permanent life-option. The pattern of changes concerning the partnership and family formation process that has been observed in Poland uncovers certain similarities with those of Western countries (Liefbroer, Dourlijn 2006; Kasearu 2007; Kasearu, Kutsar 2010). Researchers mainly include here the increase of cohabiting couples, but also of mono-parental families and persons leading a single life-style. Nevertheless there is still no agreement among Western researchers whether or not Poland will follow the example of the Scandinavian countries which have long-standing and high rates of cohabitation. The Polish case is appealing: cohabitation rates in Poland are still one of the lowest in Europe; however the pace of transformations in traditional culture, religion, policy and the socio-economic situation is surprising, particularly in view of the fact that demographic changes have taken place only within the past decade (Slany 2002; Kwak 2005; Mynarska, Bednardi 2007). Data regarding the phenomenon of cohabitation in Poland is still quite limited due to the fact that only fragments of relevant information can be extracted from the available sources (National Population Census 1995, the Population Policy Acceptance Study 2001, the National Population Census 2002, and the European Social Survey 2006.). Although marriage is still the most popular way of forming a first union, Poland is not as ‘immune’ to the spread of cohabitation as is commonly believed (Matysiak 2009). It can be observed that cohabitation is slowly but gradually becoming a real life-option for young Polish couples. The increasing prevalence and overall acceptance of this phenomenon by the younger generation of Poles raises a question about the place and role of cohabitation in Poland. However, up until now, very little has been known about the meaning cohabitants attribute to their living

arrangements and about the motivations behind their choices. The lack of comprehension regarding this phenomenon in a Polish context demands closer evaluation. This paper is a first trial to respond to this problem. The aim of this paper is 1) to clarify the most recent studies on the socio-demographic characteristics of cohabiting Polish individuals and 2) to present some elements of new empirical research on the meaning that Polish cohabitants attach to their experience of cohabitation. I approach the second part of this paper by focusing on three questions: a) What are the reasons and/or motivating factors that make young people choose to cohabit? b) How is the period of cohabitation being experienced by young Polish people and for which reason(s) is the living situation either sustained or discontinued? c) Do the cohabitants have any expectations or plans regarding a possible transition to marriage, and if so, what are they? These results constitute a part of a larger qualitative empirical research project on the phenomenon of premarital cohabitation that is presently being carried out in Poland and are expected to deepen the understanding of this phenomenon in a Polish context. This project was designed to research both the experience and conceptions of cohabitating Poles.

## **2. Cohabitation in Poland – What We Do and Do Not Know**

National Census 2002 portrays that “informal marriages accounted for 2,2% of all marriages; this compares to 1,7% in 1995 and 1,3% in 1988”<sup>1</sup>. The Population Policy Acceptance Study as of 2001 gives an estimate of 1,4%<sup>2</sup>, whereas according to the European Social Survey 2006 informal unions made up 4,5% of all unions. The available data comes exclusively from cross-sectional surveys, and the small yield of proportion between 1.4-4.5% among all unions had been fully justified given the available data on cohabitation in Poland

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<sup>1</sup> Por. Monika Mynarska, *Meanings and Attitudes Attached to Cohabitation in Poland*, Paper prepared for the Annual Meeting of Population Association of America, Los Angeles: Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research, 2006, s. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Anna Matysiak, *Is Poland really ‘immune’ to the spread of cohabitation*, “Demographic Research” nr 21, 2006, s. 217.

(Matysiak 2009).<sup>3</sup> However, these surveys do not reveal the large scale of couples living in cohabitation in Poland. According to many sociologists and demographers these statistics show only the tip of the iceberg; they claim that the official incidence of non-marital unions is not in tune with the real range of the phenomenon of cohabitation (Slany 2002; Kwak 2005; Mynarska, Bednardi 2007; Matysiak 2009). It is presupposed that the possible reason behind giving the lower estimates may be in the way respondents were asked about their living arrangement. There is no neutral way of describing the fact of living with a partner without being married in Polish language. The term *kohabitacja* (cohabitation) is understood only by a minor group of society and it is unlikely to be used in terms of living in a partnership; whereas the only commonly recognized word is *konkubinat* (concubinage) with very negative connotations. Surveys usually use at least one of these two terms and it is very possible that the use of an uncommon term (*kohabitacja*) or a term which is pejorative (*konkubinat*) might have caused a situation in which cohabitating respondents did not want to reveal the truth on the status of their union (Matysiak 2009).

#### **a. Pre-Marital Cohabitation via Post-Marital Cohabitation**

Kairi Kasearu (2007) describes a tendency characteristic of many post-socialistic countries, including Poland, where cohabiting unions have been formed after separation, divorce or after the death of a spouse. According to Kasearu the high proportion of the post-marital cohabitation is typical for countries where cohabitation is new phenomenon. “Half of the individuals living in informal unions are 40 years of age or older and only 12% of them are younger than 25 years of age. In 1995 the share was 55% and 10% respectively. Pre-marital cohabitation is still much less prevalent than post-marital cohabitation. Only 35% of cohabiting couples are made up by never married partners. The majority of them consists of at

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<sup>3</sup> A new, broader definition of family has been introduced in Polish National Census only in 2002. The family is described here as: “two or more persons, who are related to each other as a wife and a husband; living together partners (cohabitants) – persons with opposite sex or as a parent and a child”. Consequently, new definition of the family includes a couple without children, a couple with one or more children, or a single parent with one or more children. This understanding of family is a *novum* in comparison with the previously used definitions, because it broadens the category of people who are considered as its members, including the persons who do not live in the formalized marriage. This new definition also gives us a bigger perspective on cohabitation in Poland. In previous censuses cohabiting couples were put under one rubric with marriages. For the first time in the National Census 2002, marital legal status was examined (defined here as a marital status according to the binding law of the country) and distinguished from actual status of a couple, described secondarily, on the basis of the character of the relationship, of the person who lives in it. Partners were distinguished as a part of the same household, despite the legal marital status.

least one partner who has been divorced, separated, or widowed.”<sup>4</sup> Statistics also show that around 57% of informal couples in 1995 and 56% in 2002 had children; nevertheless we observe relatively lower rates of extramarital births – 16% of all births.<sup>5</sup>

## **b. Trends in First Union Formation**

According to Matysiak (2009) clear changes in the formation of the first union patterns of the two competing processes have become apparent. First, since the second half of the 1980’s we observe a clear decrease in direct entry into marriage. Secondly, there exists a converse increase in the frequency of occurrence of cohabitation since the early 1990’s. “In the period 1990-1994 entries to cohabitation constituted only 12% of all unions formed. By the years 2004-2006 this percentage has tripled.”<sup>6</sup> Matysiak’s (2009,7) qualitative analysis of women’s partnership histories confirms the growing speculations that cohabitation in Poland is a much more attractive option for first union formation than the official statistics and other cross-sectional surveys would suggest. Thus, its prevalence in comparison with Northern, Western and also other central and Eastern European countries is still relatively low. This relatively low prevalence of cohabitation in Poland raises the question of its duration and frequency of conversion into a marriage. Consequently the duration of cohabitation could be expected to be relatively short and the frequency of transition from cohabitation to marriage to be rather high.

Yet, Matysiak’s (2009) findings do not support this view completely:

Over the analyzed period less than 10% of consensual unions had been converted into a marriage within six months and only 18% within one year since union formation. Furthermore, half of women living in informal unions were still not married after four years since entering cohabitation. This suggests that relatively few women who decide for informal unions in Poland do not marry soon thereafter. It is finally notable that the intensity of conversion of cohabitation into a marriage has been decreasing over time and in the years 2004-2006 it was by 40% lower than in the late 1980’s.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Mynarska, *Meanings and Attitudes Attached to Cohabitation in Poland*, s. 3.

<sup>5</sup> National Census 2002

<sup>6</sup> Matysiak, *Is Poland really ‘immune’ to the spread of cohabitation*, s. 221.

<sup>7</sup> Matysiak, *Is Poland really ‘immune’ to the spread of cohabitation?* s. 222- 224.

These findings contain, however, a certain disadvantage. The presented survey was investigated on a sample group of women who were 25-40 of age at the time of interview, yet, there is no data available on the youngest cohorts, born in the 1980's, who were forming their partnership in the 2000's. It is speculated the results could have changed significantly, if the youngest cohorts were included in the study.

### **c. Social Prevalence**

Literature refers to two different hypotheses on how and in which social circles cohabitation appeared first. The first one suggests cohabitation to have started among the marginalized members of the society, whereas the second one views cohabitation as a phenomenon that expanded from the top of the social hierarchy to the bottom (Trost 1979).<sup>8</sup> We may conclude that cohabitation originated, in the post-World War II period, in two totally opposite social groups: the educated elite and the impoverished of society (Morgan 2000). Findings of Slany (2002), Fihel (2005) and Matysiak (2009) strongly suggest cohabitation in Poland (we observe the same tendency in the West, Cherlin 1992, Seltzer 2000) to be more prevalent among social strata with the lower level of education; whereas those with the higher level of education tend to marry directly. The majority of cohabitants is characterized by low level of education, high rate of unemployment, and quite bad financial situation, which as a result, puts them on the margin of society and brings rather negative social appraisals. On the other hand, Matysiak (2009) suggests that since the early 2000's cohabitation has been emerging among those with secondary and tertiary education. This is a lower number than among less educated cohabitants, nonetheless an increase in the frequency of entering cohabitation, together with a decline in the probability of a cohabiting relationship converting into a marital union, in the higher social strata has been found.

### **d. Younger Generation and Changing Attitudes**

Many recent surveys confirm the change in perception of cohabitation, especially among the young generation of Poles (Slany 2002, Kwak 2005, Mynarska 2006). "Young Poles are more

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According to Trost we may find the first examples of a widespread custom of cohabitating couples among upper class children and students in the USA, Sweden and France. Students who lived in the 1960's in campuses were cohabitating for four or five nights during the week and then went back to their parents' houses for the weekend.<sup>8</sup> Cohabitation occurred also among a so called "Stockholm marriages"- chronically unemployed, lower social class. Couples did not marry because they could not afford the cost of marriage.

liberal in their evaluation of cohabitation, compared to the older generation.”<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, despite this increasing acceptance of cohabitation, the number of couples living in cohabitation has not changed significantly; yet the share of young people who approve of cohabitation as an alternative to marriage is growing. This fact might indicate that the younger generation attaches different meaning to this type of living arrangement than the older one. Positive attitudes towards the phenomenon serve as good predictors for cohabitation diffusion. If we know when an ideational shift takes place, we can forecast when this concept will enjoy the definition only offered by significant lived experience (Van de Kaa, 1987).

### **e. Cohabitation in Poland – Second Stage of Diffusion Accomplished**

The changes and differences in cohabitation trends and patterns have inspired many scholars to search for typical developmental stages of family formation in the Western world. Most scholars compare different trends and patterns of cohabitation using country specific demographical characteristics such as: the proportion of cohabiting couples in different age groups, the presence of children, the average age at which people first marry and the divorce rate (Kasearu, Kutsar, 2010). “Looking for the typical developmental stages that the family formation goes through inspires researchers to predict to some extent the future trends in cohabitation patterns from country to country and offers new insights into the process of possible convergence of family patterns in an enlarged Europe.”<sup>10</sup> Here we present Kiernan’s typology (2002) that identifies sequential theoretical stages of cohabitation which is often quoted by scholars:

- first stage called “deviant or avant-garde stage”: cohabitation is practiced by very small number of couples whereas the majority of couples marry directly; it is a stage without children;
- second stage called “prelude or trial stage”: cohabitation becomes a widely accepted engagement by which a relationship that is directed towards marriage may be tested, is marked by a childless period, “so that what started as a protest against bourgeois

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<sup>9</sup> Matysiak, *Is Poland really ‘immune’ to the spread of cohabitation?* s. 220.

<sup>10</sup> K. Kasearu, Dagmar Kutsar, *Patterns behind unmarried cohabitation trends in Europe*, “European Societies”, First Published on 12 September 2010, s. 2.

marriage (...) changed into a means of gradual movement into a union, whereas direct marriage changed from being normal to being deviant”<sup>11</sup>;

- third stage called “stage of social acceptance”: cohabitation is considered as alternative to marriage, being a parent does not demand marriage contract;
- forth stage called “overlap stage”: still hypothesized, reportedly reached in Scandinavia; here marriage and cohabitation play the same role in child-giving and child-rearing;

Kiernan’s typology seems to suggest that the four stages of partnership transition presented above form a regular pattern which all countries, though at different paces, have already or (depending on the variety of factors) will follow. The question is till what extent is her stage pattern reliable in diverse Western contexts, as it would influence the predictions for cohabitation in Eastern Europe, and particularly in Poland. So far, there has been extensive research done analyzing the trends and patterns of cohabiting couples in Western Europe, Canada and the USA (Bumpass and Sweet 1989; Kuijsten 1996; Seltzer 2000, 2004; Smock 2000; Ermisch and Francesconi 2002; Kiernan 2002; Le Goff 2002), and only recently has the research extended to some Central and Eastern-European countries (Heuvelin and Timberlake 2004; Sobotka and Toulemon 2008; Hoem *et al.* 2009). Most of the studies have been country specific (Mynarska and Bernardi 2007; Matysiak 2009 for Poland; Sobotka *et al.* 2003 for the Czech Republic; Aassve *et al.* 2006 and Speder 2005 for Hungary; Hoem and Kostova 2008 for Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Russia; Katus *et al.* 2007 for Estonia). Comparative studies have only just begun among Eastern European scholars. According to Matysiak, analysis of specific demographic parameters in the Polish context and its application in Kiernan’s model enables us to situate cohabitation in Poland in the *second stage* of diffusion. In other words, cohabitation in Poland has reached the status or the meaning of a “prelude or trial stage” in the relationship formation. As theoretically described by Kiernan, cohabitation in this stage is understood as a commonly accepted engagement in order to test a relationship that may be directed towards marriage; however it is still a stage marked by a lack of children.

### 3. Data and Method

The complexity of the phenomenon of cohabitation itself and issues that need to be

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<sup>11</sup> Patricia Morgan, *Marriage – Lite. The Rise of Cohabitation and its Consequences*, London: Institute for the Study of Civil Society, 2000, s. 9.

understood within this phenomenon demand application of two different qualitative approaches. Qualitative method aims at an in-depth understanding of human behavior and the reasons and meanings that govern that behavior. Particularly, I use the phenomenological approach in order to describe the essence of the experience of cohabitation (focusing on the meaning of this experience). The phenomenological approach presupposes that human experience makes sense to those who live it and that human experience can be consciously expressed (Dukes, 1984). This applies to the experience of cohabitation. I assume that living in cohabitation makes sense to those who live it and that this experience can be consciously expressed. Secondly I apply elements of grounded theory that aims at defining a theory generated from data systematically obtained and analyzed through the constant comparative method. From this approach I expect to discover the individual characteristics of cohabitants that might have influenced the present and future choices in relationships and to develop a theoretical comparison of them (Strauss, Corbin, 1990, 1998). In this article I present results of the phenomenological study only.

To qualify for the study, cohabitants interviewed were theoretically chosen. I specified cohabitants by choosing 2 theoretical units: a) duration of the relationship (the relationship must be more than one year) b) the attitude towards marriage (couples living in cohabitation with concrete marital plans and couples living in cohabitation with undefined marital plans). The duration criterion was used to ensure that cohabitants had been together long enough for the relationship to be somewhat solidified (Manning, Cohen, Smock and Ostgaard, 2009). The attitude criterion was applied in order to understand the role of the phase of cohabitation in the union formation process, whether it is understood by cohabitants as a prelude to marriage, a stage in the marriage process, an alternative to remaining single, an alternative to marriage or indistinguishable from marriage (Heuveline, Timberlake, 2004). However, due to the serious difficulties in finding individuals without direct or indirect marital plans, the second criterion was eliminated from the survey.<sup>12</sup>

A guideline of a semi-structured in-depth couple interview with 21 questions

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<sup>12</sup> By direct marital plans we mean concrete plans connected with decision of getting married such as: couple being engaged or an established date of wedding. By indirect marital plans we mean a wish, an intention to marry.



formulated in a general, narrative form was designed.<sup>13</sup> Each member of a heterosexual couple was interviewed individually, which lasted between 1 and 2 hours. Interviews were audio-taped, transcribed verbatim, and translated from Polish into English. For clarity, due to the confidentiality requirements the names of all respondents have been changed. Participants were interviewed at the location of their choice, including public places like: library, restaurants, but in most of the cases at more private location such as their own apartments. Because the aim of the study is to investigate the innovative, premarital form of cohabitation, the sample was limited to the group of people most prone to adopt modern attitudes and behaviors (Mynarska, 9). This interview was conducted with 20 young Poles (10 couples) ranging in age from 20 to 34, living in 5 different big Polish cities – Warsaw, Lodz, Poznan, Gdynia, Gdansk (those people are more exposed to the modern and cosmopolitan climate), and better educated than the average population (students and people with a university degree). This age group focuses on the family formation years, when young adults make the most important decisions about work, marriage and children (Sassler, 2004). 5 different documents were used during the interviews: the protocol on the interview procedures, a consent form, a face sheet, a set of actual questions and a post-interview form. A pilot test has been conducted to refine data collection plans and develop relevant lines of questions. The recruitment techniques in our study do not result in a random sample and are not representative of the population, not allowing us to generalize the results.

## **4. Empirical Findings**

### **a. The Meaning of Cohabitation**

Basically, I observe two different meanings that respondents attribute to their living arrangement. First, all respondents talk of cohabitation as a relationship a testing phase where partners are given an opportunity to know each other and learn from each other; to observe and understand mutual *predilections and habits*; to get to know each other better on all possible levels of life with its advantages (e.g. spending more time together, comfort of

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<sup>13</sup> This type of technique provides the same basic question to each respondent, but allows the interviewer to pursue different topics and probe for more information. In-depth interviews are a good method for exploring perceptions, behaviors, and cognitive justifications while providing a high level of detail in comparison with closed-ended surveys. Summarizing, semi-structured interviews attempt to understand complex social behaviors, without imposing restrictive categories that may prematurely limit not only the inquiry but also the answers, Fontana and Frey, 1994).

intimacy and security) and disadvantages (e.g. daily routine, housework, possibility of frequent arguments); to confront the “*idealized figure of my partner that I used to meet occasionally with the one from the real, daily life*” (Beata, 29); and finally to adapt and adjust to each other before a further step is made. The following quote illustrates it best:

*“I think that living together has made us decide to be together in spite of our imperfections. I used to think that it is possible to change a man. I was living with my previous boyfriend too. After that experience I know that this is impossible. I realized if you are with someone, you are with all his imperfections. I had a chance to know all his imperfections, so I’ll marry him with all awareness. I know that such a situation will not happen, that one day I will tell to myself: oh my God, what have I done, who is this guy... Sometimes it is like that when after some time of living together, there are some features of character that you can’t stand in the other person.”* (Ania, 27)

For many it is a stage of becoming more conscious and intentional about future directions and of getting ready for mature responsibilities where husband-like and wife-like roles might be anticipated.

The majority of respondents cannot imagine entering marriage directly and the phase of living together constitutes a necessary trial period. Beata (29) says: “*before you start to live with someone, you can’t know how the person really is. Now I know what I might expect from him; the first period of being together is a mutual pretending, a projection of a better I; only with time the real nature comes out and you can see how you can handle the real “I” of your partner*”. Only very few respondents claim they would be able to, or before moving in they had wished to, marry directly but they see many positive effects and have no regrets from having lived in cohabitation.

The second meaning that respondents attribute to cohabitation is connected with the relationship formation process. All respondents treat cohabitation as a next, more serious level in the relationship. Many argue that “*living together was a further step in our relationship, a very natural step; an expression of treating each other more seriously and of a deeper commitment*” (Maciek, 30), “*it is like an engagement without a ring*” (Krzysztof, 29). All cohabitants, especially women, argue that the decision to move in was dictated by an overwhelming need of spending more time together, of being closer, of having a chance to

deepen their feelings, love and the meaning of the relationship itself. For many, attaching this meaning to the relationship has taken place in a process, just as the decision to move in has taken place gradually. Adam (26) describes: *“you stay overnight for the first, second and third time, you spend more time together, you get closer, you leave more and more clothes at her place and then you stay for good; for some time it is not even official for both of you that you live together”*. In fact, it is misleading to describe this as some sort of decision because of the formality associated with the term; it is better described as the nominal recognition of something almost completely emerged in a tacit way from the relationship itself. Nevertheless some respondents made a conscious, well-discussed decision to move in, in the form of “a big step”, which is usually dictated by external reasons like: the opportunity to buy or rent an apartment, moving to a bigger city in order to study or work. Ola (28) describes: *“We have been planning on living together for a long time. First, both of us wanted to graduate university. When this happened, we made sure we had stable jobs. Now we are financially independent – we took a loan from a bank to buy an apartment. We do not have to exploit our parents’ financial resources anymore. Finally, the right time has come”*.

I observe a certain pattern where the development of the relationship (and the growth of commitment in it) goes together with external reasons: dating - starting a university/first job - moving in together – graduating – engagement - buying an apartment – marriage. Some of these steps happen simultaneously, some last for some time before the next one takes place, some might be omitted. The main factors that stimulate this sequence are: the age of cohabitants, the age difference between partners, time of studies, the situation at work, and finances. It turns out that way men and women perceive the transition from being single, through cohabitation to being married, differs. For most women, the meaning of the changes that occur between being single, cohabitation and marriage can be characterized by a *continuum*, *“a smooth process of growing commitment”* (Agnieszka, 20), whereas for men there is a significant demarcation between state of singlehood or non-marriage and marriage, where cohabitation constitutes another phase of life, but real life-commitment is connected particularly with marriage. Krzysztof (29) makes a clear distinction: *“cohabitation is cohabitation, marriage is marriage”*.

There is also a difference between cohabitants concerning their marital plans. It has to be pointed out that half of cohabitants on the day of their interview were already engaged or

planning on getting engaged and had begun the process of organizing the wedding. Nevertheless, very few of them had begun cohabitating with a clear plan of getting married, yet for a majority the decision to marry came naturally even without this initial intention.: *“We just started to live together, without any special plans for the future. We didn’t have a marriage perspective at the beginning. We decided if something goes wrong, my boyfriend would move out. It was a process, a natural thing to do. We finished our studies, we got our first stable jobs and finally the time has come. We engaged a month ago, we are getting married in 6months”* says Ania (27). The other half (these are usually students who have been cohabitating for a relatively short time) do not have direct marital plans, though none of them reject the idea itself. All the interviewed women declare that if their partner would propose marriage on the day of the interview, they would all say “yes”. However they argue they need more time to let the relationship develop, be tested and have certain things in life accomplished (studies, work etc.).

My survey confirms Mynarska’s (2006) results regarding the evaluation of cohabitation. Respondents evaluate cohabitation in various ways, depending on the meaning they attribute to it. According to all my respondents, the phase of cohabitation is considered as a positive experience of mutual learning and of growing commitment, stability and responsibility for each other. However they emphasize the transitory or temporary character of cohabitation. Bartek (24) says: *“Being in cohabitation is being on a way, but being incomplete yet”*. It is *“being ‘like a family’, but not being a family yet”*. Directly or indirectly, they treat the time of living together as a serious, preparatory phase that, if everything goes well, will conclude in marriage. The option of living in cohabitation permanently was not met with any appreciation amongst the interviewees.

## **b. Reasons for Marriage**

The discussion on the meaning of cohabitation is extremely important in the light of discussions on the reasons for and the meaning that cohabitants attribute to marriage. To paraphrase one of the respondents, *“cohabitation makes sense only when you have the perspective of marriage in front of you”* (Olga, 22). They also claim marriage to differ in many ways from the phase of cohabitation. Respondents gave several reasons for the necessity of moving from cohabitation into marriage, and their concerns oscillated between

their own particular circumstances and reflections on marriage in general:

1. Practicality - legal and financial advantages (taxes, heritage, mortgage ect);
2. A wish to show respect to the family, but also because of the pressures from the family to formalize the situation (marriage is more desirable because of the social recognition it brings);
3. Attachment to tradition/wish to have a traditional wedding setting - respondents express the strong need to celebrate their relationship the way everybody does; all those engaged respondents were planning on organizing huge, traditional weddings in the church; and those without direct plans on marrying right now (no engagement) dream of the same type of a wedding; *“It is important that a girl can wear a white wedding dress, a guy a nice tuxedo, to have a nice party – this setting is important to show or express how important this marriage is to you”*(Agnieszka, 20); *“I was brought up in this tradition, I want to celebrate it the way I know. I can’t imagine it in a different way, I don’t know any other way”*(Olga, 22);
4. Religious/spiritual reasons - all the respondents declare themselves to be Catholics, however they claim not to be regular church-goers and they all criticize the institutional dimension of the Church. However, they emphasize the importance of Christian values; none of the respondents would want to marry only in the city hall as this would be only a formality with no deeper meaning; they also talk about spiritual, religious experience and the importance of the sacrament of marriage and vows exchanged during the ceremony; *“We are brought up in this faith and the sacrament would be important to us in some ways. The fact that we can’t make it to go to church every Sunday does not mean that we don’t accept the values”*(Bartek, 24);
- 5) The wish to seal, express and finalize the love and commitment between partners – it is an argument brought up by all respondents, however women in particular refer to the strong need for stability and security that marriage is believed to cement, to bond the relationship fully; one of the respondents called marriage a sacrament of ultimate confirmation of love between her and her partner;
- 6) The wish to have a child – by all respondents marriage is considered as a beginning of a family and they can imagine having and rearing children only within the marital structure. Marta (23) says: *“If I think of having kids, this decision would go together and only with planning on marriage. Marriage is a place destined for that”*;

### c) The Meaning of Marriage

Marriage is valued very highly by all cohabitants. The meaning of marriage is associated with the highest level of commitment. It is considered as the finalization of a certain process, it's the end of one phase and the beginning of a new one. Living in marriage is a "*complete*" and "*pure*" way of being together, whereas cohabitation is seen as a stage of certain incompleteness. Usually respondents claim that, in terms of every-day life marriage changes nothing between partners, but on the other hand, in distinction from cohabitation, it stops being a private concern and becomes something public in the social sphere. Olga (22) says: "*we become one team, a new family unit; before my family was me and my parents, now my family is me and him; also I will become a part of his family so as his wife I would have to take part in his family life*" and Ania (27) adds: "*I will have his surname, our children will have the same surname, we will call each other a husband and wife*".

Marriage is considered to be something much more serious than cohabitation, it is for better and worse, until "*death do us apart*" and not "as long as it lasts", as a sign and fulfillment of real love. Cohabitation is evaluated in the perspective of "today", marriage is seen as life-time plan. Marriage is believed to have protective powers: "*it is in the end much more difficult to separate*". The exchange of vows in front of the altar, the promise to take responsibility for the other person throughout the whole of one's life, in the presence of the future husband/wife, family and God oblige a couple to overcome difficulties. "*I thought that maybe we will try against all odds, we can't simply give up. When some difficulties appear, most of the people want to resign; they should try to make an effort*" concludes Beata (29).

### 5. Summary

The results of the survey have shown that despite the growing acceptance of cohabitation in the Western world as an alternative to marriage, in Poland this living arrangement has become an attractive option mainly because of the chance of spending more time together, being closer to each other and the wish to express higher commitment. It is not cohabitation per se but the aspect of sharing the household that makes it more appealing than living apart, however a qualified Christian marriage remains the most fulfilling state of the relationship for most. Clearly, because respondents aim at a stable and secure marriage, cohabitation is acknowledged to play a testing role and to be an expression of further

commitment in the family formation process. The ways of forming a stable family are definitively changing and premarital cohabitation has emerged as a part of this process. Nevertheless, the desire for marriage among the surveyed groups remains strongly internalized. It is possible that cohabitation will become more and more popular in Poland, however the transitory nature of this phenomenon and the specific meaning and attitudes attributed to cohabitation make me doubt that cohabitation would soon become a life-long alternative to marriage.

The crucial issue that needs to be underlined here is the new meaning attached to both the period of cohabitation and marriage. As it is clear from the empirical evidence, the value of marriage has not lost its importance; nevertheless its meaning in contemporary Western society has changed tremendously. In the eyes of contemporary young Poles, the beginning of a new relationship is no longer initiated in marriage, but in cohabitation. Despite the negative predictions about the potential influence of the period of cohabitation on the stability of subsequent marriage, statistics prove it not to be the case for those committed to relationship (Brown, 2004). The reality of pre-marital cohabitation with its characteristic features and role in the relationship formation process should be the basis of a deeper reflection on the condition, meaning and purpose of contemporary marriage, especially Christian marriage. Despite the fact that cohabitation is not a recent phenomenon, its growing prevalence in modern times is of significant importance - it has become a part of broader pattern of social transformations that strongly affect family life today, also in Poland. The institution of marriage is still common and distinctive; however the growing popularity of cohabitation might indicate that this situation could change. Given that several shifts in the meaning of marriage and of cohabitation have taken place rapidly, it is appropriate to think that marriage as we understand it today is also in a transitional phase. There are many speculations about the possible directions and shifts within the family life. Cherlin has sketched three alternatives: "The first, a return to a more dominant, institutionalized form of marriage, seems unlikely. In the second, the current situation continues: marriage remains important, but not as dominant, and retains its high symbolic status. In the third, marriage fades into just one of many kinds of interpersonal romantic relationships."<sup>14</sup> The remarkable fact is that the institutional marriage has been a dominant form of family life for a relatively short period in

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<sup>14</sup> Andrew Cherlin, *The deinstitutionalization of American Marriage*, "Journal of Marriage and Family", Listopad 2004, nr 4, s. 858.

history (Seff, 1995). At any given period in history we trace family forms or/and institutions that would express values and needs of people of their times. Consistently, marriage of today should be perceived according to the same principle. Marriage is not a permanent institution and the very increase of cohabitation points out the flexible nature of family (despite statistical dominance of marriage for the last two hundred years, the other forms of family life should not be considered as illegitimate or immoral). Perhaps this shift in the meaning of marriage, by some called crisis, may not be necessarily treated as an emergency situation and total threat to marriage as an institution, but rather as “a natural phenomenon, a function of growth rather than error or mismanagement, and necessary and creative way to fuller expression of reality or life”<sup>15</sup>.

### **STRESZCZENIE**

#### ***“Zjawisko Kohabitacji Przedmałżeńskiej w Polsce oraz jej Znaczenie: Prezentacja Wyników Badan Jakościowych”***

Dane dotyczące zjawiska kohabitacji w Polsce są nadal dość ograniczone ze względu na fakt, iż wyłącznie fragmenty dotyczące tego zagadnienia mogą być użyte z dostępnych źródeł (Spis Ludności z 1995 roku, Spis Ludności z 2002 roku). Kohabitacja przedmałżeńska w Polsce stopniowo staje się realnym sposobem na życie dla rosnącej liczby młodych polskich par. Wzrastająca popularność tego zjawiska nasuwa pytanie o miejsce i rolę kohabitacji w życiu młodych Polaków. Natomiast do chwili obecnej niewiele wiadomo o stosunku kohabitantów do ich planów życiowych oraz o umotywowaniu ich wyborów. W artykule podjęto próbę: 1) weryfikacji najnowszych badań socjo-demograficznych charakteryzujących polskiego kohabitanta oraz 2) prezentacji wybranych elementów badania empirycznego opisującego znaczenie, jakie młodzi Polacy nadają etapowi kohabitacji. Druga część odpowiada na trzy konkretne pytania: a) Jakie są powody i/lub czynniki skłaniające respondentów do życia w kohabitacji? b) Jakie są doświadczenia młodych Polaków dotyczące kohabitacji i z jakich powodów chcą pozostać w kohabitacji bądź zmienić swoją sytuację życiową? c) Czy

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<sup>15</sup> Jim Christie, *Marriage in Crisis: Are You For or Against?* “INTAMS review” 1997, nr 3, s. 52.



kohabitanci mają plany bądź oczekiwania wobec możliwego przejścia w związek małżeński i jakich aspektów te oczekiwania dotyczą? Wyniki opisane stanowią część projektu badań jakościowo-empirycznych na temat zjawiska kohabitacji przedmałżeńskiej, która obecnie ma miejsce w Polsce, a którego celem jest większe zrozumienie tego zjawiska w kontekście polskim.

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